



HB 551- Maryland Medical Assistance Program and Health Insurance - Coverage and Reimbursement of Telehealth Services

House Health & Government Operations Committee February 10, 2021

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SUPPORT

MDDCSAM is the Maryland state chapter of the American Society of Addiction Medicine whose members are physicians and other health providers who treat people with substance use disorders.

Behavioral health services are characterized by barriers to access for many patients.

Services to patients with behavioral health challenges are regularly interrupted or prevented by **barriers related to transportation, physical disability, travel time, time, and the need for appointment flexibility to accommodate competing employment, childcare and other demands**. People in need of behavioral health services are more likely to have financial challenges that make these barriers even greater.

In my practice of providing substance use and mental health services, **the option to use audio services, and services outside the clinic, has DRAMATICALLY IMPROVED QUALITY AND ACCESSIBILITY**.

The **quality of audio-only services appears equal to in-person services for behavioral health**, when appropriate and selected by the patient.

When patients become unstable they temporarily need more frequent follow-up which would have been impossible under the old rules. This happens, for example, when patients need their dose of medication adjusted to relieve withdrawal symptoms, or side effects, or when they are going through a crisis. In these circumstances patients are especially **UNLIKELY TO BE ABLE TO STOP WHAT THEY'RE DOING AND COME TO THE CLINIC JUST FOR A CONVERSATION**. Regular in-person clinic visits can be time consuming and challenging for this population in any circumstances.

When I contact patients by phone and offer them the option of a secure video visit, they typically decline because they may have found it time consuming or difficult to establish. Some patients are completely unable to participate in video telehealth. Talking by phone tends to be quicker and easier, and **the decision on how to receive services that fits their needs should be up to the patient**.

There is increasing recognition that the field of substance use treatment must move further toward peer and other recovery support services. Peers and paraprofessionals make up a significant and growing part of the workforce. **It is critical that telehealth services delivered by supervised certified peers and paraprofessionals are available and reimbursed on the same basis as in-person services**.